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published in
Proceedings of the Sixteenth Belgium-Netherlands Artificial Intelligence Conference (BNAIC'04), Oktober 21-22, Groningen, The Netherlands)
2004

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Agent-Based Information Retrieval: Legal and Technical Considerations in a Simple Case

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The full version of this paper appeared in: Claudia Cevenini (editor), *The Law and Electronic Agents: Proceedings of the LEA 04 workshop*, pp. 95-107.

More and more people regard the Internet as an important source of information for work and private activities. For example, many scientists use web-pages, newsgroups and e-mail to remain well-informed about their research areas. Important activities include searching for new publications, monitoring research progress and keeping track of citations to their own publications. Publishers, such as IEEE, ACM, Elsevier, Kluwer, MIT Press, and Springer, recognize these needs and provide online digital libraries. Other organizations, e.g. DBLP, CiteSeer and Ingenta, offer additional services, such as maintaining indices on a per-author basis. Some of these organizations offer public access to digital versions of publications, while others provide such access on a subscription basis. Subscribers can be organizations themselves, such as universities and research institutions. Usually, a subscription applies to an entire organization; for example for a university, it includes access for employees, students and guests. The access policy, however, is 'campus-based': off-campus access is limited.

The paper explores the current usage of the Elsevier ScienceDirect[1] digital library in the context of the contract of the Vrije Univesiteit Amsterdam (VUA) with Elsevier and analyses possibilities and consequences for on- and off-campus access involving software agents.

Agent technology is a promising and enabling technology [1], not only useful for e-commerce applications, but also for information retrieval applications. Software agents offer business and scientific opportunities for all involved parties. ScienceDirect may make its products more attractive by providing new

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facilities for (remote) automated access. The VUA may benefit from gaining more control on the use of ScienceDirect, e.g. by enforcing access policies and volume-restrictions on agent-based access. In addition, VUA may offer different services than other universities, for example, employees could train their own agents with a set of publications to find similar publications by searching through publications in ScienceDirect's database. VUA employees and students may benefit by acquiring 24/7 access to ScienceDirect together with possibilities to better search for relevant publications and be better informed about new developments.

A leading question in our research was whether agents are allowed to access the ScienceDirect website, according to the VUA contract. If not, then our agent-based scenarios would be in violation of the contract. Surprisingly, the contract allows access from alternative platforms and even expresses the willingness of ScienceDirect to cooperate and assist in the development. Thus, it can be concluded that the legality of using software agents in this context is no longer questionable.

Acknowledgements

This multi-disciplinary research is supported by Stichting NLnet (http://www.nlnet.nl) and conducted within the ALIAS project [2], in which legal implications of the use of agent systems from both a legal and technological perspective are investigated.

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